



“I learnt to live happily”:

Self-reflection on success factors by NZ Aid Programme scholars

I learnt to live happily – and that’s the most important thing.
(Student 11)

The most precious thing I’ve gained here is people.
(Student 6)

It was the journey that I treasured most. You know, it was also an emotional one. It was not only academic.
(Student 12)

Purely an academic learning experience?

Or a time of **tremendous personal growth**?

The makings of a ‘global citizen’?



The meta-learning level:

Better documentation of our day-to-day work
= better understanding, support and recognition of our roles.

How can I establish a 'culture of inquiry'
among student support staff at Victoria International?



Illustrative small-scale study:

- What are the valued factors emerging from exit interviews that a particular cohort of VUW students say made their experience a success?
- How do the findings inform our practice?

Meta level:

- How do I make it valid/reliable when I'm so busy day-to-day?
- Research model?
- How can I improve methods to get better findings?
- What are the foundations of a rigorous 'culture of inquiry' in a practice setting?



Action Research:

What is it and why was it an appropriate model in this case?

- Practical
- Change
- Cyclical, evolving process
- Participation

- Strategy with flexible methods and methodology
(Denscombe, 2003)

- 'The primary 'rule' of action research practice is to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences.'
(Reason and Bradbury, 2001)



Things to consider 1: Work culture

Is my work culture conducive to successful action research?

- Innovative
 - *because* it is supportive
 - Collaborative
 - the importance of a 'critical friend'
- (Herr and Anderson, 2005)

What is *NOT* a helpful work culture?

- One of 'stress, fear and resistance to innovation'
- (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001)



Things to consider 2: Personal background and role

- Who am I? What are my values?
- Do I have the skills?
- Am I on top of the job?

(Coghlan and Brannick, 2005)



Things to consider 3: What data are possible in my daily work routine?

- What do I actually have time for?

'researcher-friendly' methodology

(Herr and Anderson, 2005)

- Am I passionate about it?

"The project needs to touch their heart in some way if it is to sustain them."

(Reason and Marshall, 2001, as quoted in Herr and Anderson, 2005)



Chosen part of daily work routine for research: The exit interview

- 30-60 minutes
- Part of a farewell meeting held with each individual student
- Opportunity to reflect on their experience and leave their 'legacy'
- For me, a way to seek verbal feedback and to monitor satisfaction levels
- For the student, a natural conclusion to our relationship and to their scholarship period



Things to consider 4: Methods and Methodology

- 'Designing the plane while flying it' – retrospective research design
(Herr and Anderson, 2005)
- Development of the exit interview:
written survey to oral semi-structured interview
- Interviews not recorded in full



Things to consider 4: Methods and Methodology

- **Data-driven research questions:**
did not match original interview questions
- **My sample:** who were the participants and how did I find them?
- **Analysis:** developing a data-driven code and identifying themes

'Repetition is the most common theme recognition technique and is based on the premise that if a concept reoccurs throughout and/or across transcripts, it is likely a theme.'

(Ryan and Bernard, 2003)



Findings: Major themes

- Support
- Learning
- New Zealand
- Making the most of it
- Making friends



Presentation of findings:

- **Data summary tables**

‘tallies and frequencies in qualitative research are essentially a supplement to the narrative’.

(Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012)

- **‘thick description’** (Denzin, 2001)



Finding 1: Support

Theme Mentioned	Support	Victoria International	VI NZ Aid Scholarship team	Student Learning Support Service	School, lecturer, supervisor	Library / university resources	University Community	General Community
Number of students	21	4	10	9	9	2	3	7
%	70%	13%	33%	30%	30%	7%	10%	23%

Key support services:

- Scholarship team at Victoria International
- Student learning support service
- School, lecturer or supervisor



Finding 2: Learning

Theme Mentioned	Learning	Academic Learning	Personal Growth	Internationalisation of curriculum
Number of students	28	22	14	6
%	93%	73%	47%	20%

Key sub-themes:

- Academic learning:

quality of teaching, refining skills, thesis journey, collegial relationships with lecturers and supervisors, becoming independent learners, developing help-seeking skills

- Personal Growth:

increased self-knowledge, more independent, developed individual interests and hobbies, improved character

- Importance of an internationalised curriculum



Finding 3: New Zealand

Theme Mentioned	New Zealand	Appreciated country / way of life	Valued multi-cultural society	NZ influenced personal growth
Number of students	19	15	6	11
%	63%	50%	20%	37%

Key sub-themes:

- Appreciated multicultural NZ and way of life

safe, beautiful, transparent, efficient, greater diversity than home

- NZ influenced own personal growth

better understanding of self as individual, calmer and simpler more balanced lifestyle, less career-oriented, more grateful and respectful



Finding 4: Making friends

Theme Mentioned	Making friends	Friendships positively impacted studies	Difficulty of making friends with Kiwis	University assisted friendship-making	Making friends with home country community	General mention of making friends
Number of students	24	4	21	11	7	15
%	80%	13%	70%	37%	23%	50%

Key sub-theme:

- Difficulty of making friends with Kiwis

Language barrier, too busy with study, course structure not supportive of making friendships (i.e. no regular classes)



Finding 5: Making the most of it

Theme Mentioned	Making the most of it	Balancing life and study	Settling and connecting quickly	Utilising available support	Being prepared / knowing what to expect	Being flexible and open-minded	General mention of theme
Number of students	29	15	18	19	16	6	1
%	97%	50%	60%	63%	53%	20%	3%

Key sub-themes:

- Being prepared and knowing what to expect
- Balancing study with other aspects of life / time management
- Being open-minded and flexible to the new environment
- Settling in and connecting to the new context quickly
- Utilizing available support to deal with the ups and downs



Interpretation of findings: A narrative emerges

- Support
- Learning
- New Zealand
- Making the most of it
- Making friends



One time I felt like I was not at home but not here either.
I was in a world of academic writing.
I was not able to savour Kiwi culture. (Student 12)



Most of the time I just spent it inside my room. (Student 36)



This was really really my trouble in the beginning.
I cancelled all meetings, avoided the socialising,
but I wasn't productive and afterwards I regret it. (Student 32)



It's easier to be a balanced person in NZ. (Student 13)



When I first came, I think I still got the [home culture] philosophy that work is the most important thing in life and everything else should make room for study.

But I've learnt it's absolutely untrue – it's important, but it's not the most important thing. (Student 13)



I'm expecting a brighter side of myself. I can use my knowledge, my experience, my life experience – what I've learnt here will be influential for my whole life – not just my work. [It's] more wholly about how you live, who you are, not just how you work. I will be contributing more than just in terms of work, but in terms of approach to life. I'm an improved individual so through that society will benefit more from me. (Student 32)



Personal 'learnings' and where to from here

'Solid action research leads to a deepened understanding of the question posed as well as to more sophisticated questions'.

(Herr and Anderson, 2005)

"If an action research project does not make a difference, in a specific way, for practitioners and/or their clients, then it has failed to achieve its objective."

(Stringer, 2007)

'[action]researchers can expect that their work will contribute to their own sense of being-in-the-world'

(Herr and Anderson, 2005)





Questions and Discussion